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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to assess the potential for educational achievement, especially among children, of recent West Indian immigrants to the United States. Two basic sources have been used: data collected for the author's dissertation, and interviews with high school principals in Brooklyn, New York. After an overview of the history of West Indian immigration, the recent status of the immigrants is discussed in terms of access to jobs, housing, and education. This is followed by a discussion of the settlement patterns and acculturation of the immigrants. Problems faced by parents unfamiliar with the educational process in the United States and children transferring to American schools are delineated. It is concluded that the difficulties faced by students from the West Indies are not the result of the students' inability to profit from education but are the result of the failure of the educational system and the West Indian community to make the process meaningful for the children. (MK)

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TOPIC: WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS AND THE UNITED STATES EDUCATION PROCESS.

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Since the latter part of the 19th Century, British West Indians have migrated to other countries in search of the means to a better life. The lack of economic and social mobility in the postemancipation period was the precipitating factor. They cut cane on American-owned plantations in Cuba (Maingot, 1971) and in the Dominican Republic(Hendricks, 1975). They helped to build the Panama Canal and later moved on to Costa Rica to build the railroads and work on the banana plantations (Bryce-Laporte, 1972). They also migrated to Canada, but the United States was the desired destination. Often the migration to the United States was indirect, going first to Cuba, Panama, or Canada before they finally arrived here.

The large influx of West Indians into the United States occurred in two distinct periods: during the period of limited restrictions which ended with the Immigration Act of 1924, and, after the 1965 Immigration Act. Thus, the time difference and social, economic, and political changes which occurred in the societies' posited different conditions for each group at time of entry.

While the lack of economic viability was the major factor in the West Indian migration, there was also the expectation that it would provide opportunity for general self-improvement. Education was high among their priorities, having been perceived as the most feasible means of social mobility. This perception is not unfounded since, in their countries, individuals with high levels of education and training command the more prestigious jobs and are highly acclaimed for their achievement.

For the immigrants of the early period, education beyond the high-school level could only be obtained abroad and only the wealthy, therefore, had access to such institutions. The establishment of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in the late 1950's and, more recently, the

establishment of branches in some of the other islands have facilitated wider access to university education. Even so, admission is highly competitive and limited facilities combine to eliminate many who aspire to university education.* The recent immigrants also include education among their migration goals. Thus, migration to the United States, or elsewhere, is not merely to overcome basic economic needs, but also to gain the means for social mobility when they return home.

The problem this paper attempts to assess is the potential for educational achievement among recent West Indian immigrants, especially the children. One often hears this statement: "West Indians are bright. They always do well in school." This statement concerns the children of the early immigrants and, it is reasonable to conclude, there is some basis to the statement since reports show a high percentage of achievers among West Indians (Haynes, 1968; Glazer and Moynihan, 1970; Reid, 1968; Sowell, 1975). The question which now arises is: Can we uncritically extend this statement to the West Indians who arrived recently? There is national concern over the general decline in academic excellence (New York Times, March 23, 1978, B12) and greater concerns for the education of students in the inner-city areas (including New York which is the primary area of residence of West Indian immigrants). The ability of West Indians to achieve, in the present educational systems, will depend on the resources they bring into the system and their ability to manipulate the process to their advantage.

DATA

The problem one encounters in attempting to evaluate any situation of West Indians is the absence of specific and readily available data. Although

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* Jamaica and Guyana have "free education" policies at all levels. However, the above mentioned factors continue to limit access. Adults who wish to pursue educational goals have little opportunity to do so in their own country.

Black people have been researched extensively, no distinction is made between natives and immigrants. Therefore, basic research and projections are necessary in order to make even the most elementary generalizations. There are two basic sources which contribute to this paper: the data collected for my dissertation (1979)[1], and interviews with some high-school principals in Brooklyn[2]. The approach is basically the one developed in my dissertation which is a comparison of the two groups of Jamaican Immigrants based on the social conditions in the societies at time of departure and arrival. Education is the focus of the discussion. The presentation must be viewed in light of the shortcomings.

Oscar Handlin (1959:20) said that the character of immigrants' adjustment can be understood only when the circumstances of their departure from their own country is known. Thus, if we are to understand the nature of the participation of West Indian immigrants in the educational process in the United States, we should know their attitudes toward education, the resources they brought with them, and their motivation to succeed in this area. It is also important to examine the social arrangement of education and other institutions in the host country to understand how immigrants' goals are facilitated or hindered by such arrangements.

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[1]The dissertation "Identification and Adaptation: A Study of Two Groups of Jamaican Immigrants in New York City" was based on a total response of 234. 42 from the early period (1920-1940) and 192 from the recent immigrants (Post-1960). The data was collected from a questionnaire survey, personal interviews, and participant observations.

[2]The interview of high school principals was carried out early in 1978 following a conference (December, 1977) sponsored by the Jamaican Progressive League to investigate the conditions of West Indians in New York City. The interviews were done by myself and Megan McLaughlin of Columbia School of Social Work and New York Community Trust.

The background situation of West Indians is too well-known to warrant discussion here. The early group came from a socially and economically backward country to one that was in the throes of industrialization. They also experienced the "great depression" of the 1930's. The recent immigrants left a country which had, by then, reached the "middle development" stage and had significantly expanded its social services, especially in education. They came into an industrialized society and specific job designations.

The earlier immigrants expected a more open and democratic society where economic and educational opportunities would be available to them as long as they were willing to work hard. The reality they encountered was a segregated and repressive society with limited opportunities for Blacks, natives, or foreigners. They soon discovered that immediate survival needs required the deferment of educational goals. Racism, which resulted in economic discrimination and housing segregation, along with the depression of the 1930's combined to make West Indian immigrants' life less than they anticipated. Yet, in my research, 95 percent of the respondents from this period indicated that they were satisfied with what they have achieved. In spite of the hardships, they did achieve some of their goals. Some did not achieve their original goals but took advantage of the limited opportunities that were available to them.

Ira Reid (1939:121) estimated that one-third of the Black professionals -- doctors, dentists, and lawyers -- in Harlem were foreign-born. This is remarkable because, at that time, the foreign-born population was much less than that percentage of the population in New York City.[3] Others were

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[3]The estimated percentage of West Indians in the Black population in New York City (1930's) varied. Glazer and Moynihan (1970:34-5) estimated "no less than 17% and, with their children, 20-25%." A more realistic figure is 10-12% (Reid, 1968:85-86; Handlin, 1962:49).

engaged in business which made them less dependent on the White-dominated economic structure for employment.

What made them achieve? Dennis Forsythe attributed their achievement to their belief in the "Protestant Ethic" based on the idea that through education, thrift, discipline, hard work and planning, one's lot in life could be improved. He further argued that:

> ...relative to Afro-Americans, West Indian immigrants were a select group of young, able-bodied, educated men and women less encumbered by families, and fiercely driven by their determination to "make good" in America. Since they regarded themselves as sojourners, their relationship to the American environment was strictly specific and instrumental: they hoped to acquire quick wealth and return to the Caribbean, and to live as respectable members of the West Indian colonial elite or just as respectable members of their village communities.

West Indian immigrants, prior to 1940, were unlikely to have educational levels beyond the high school contrary to Forsythe's assertion. However, because literacy was a condition of entry, the level of literacy among these immigrants exceeded that of the general population of the host country. Ira Reid (1968:84-5) found a literacy level of 98.6 - 99 percent. Educational achievement in this group stemmed from opportunities in the host country. Night school and industrial education were utilized advantageously. These types of education provided the basis for later entry into professional schools. Even among recent immigrants, occupational classification indicates that the majority are in the low educational classification. My sample of Jamaicans revealed 55% early and 46% recent immigrants have education below the college level. The percentage with graduate/professional education is higher among the early immigrants, 26% compared to 13% in the recent group. Time is undoubtedly a factor in the differences, the early immigrants are no longer pursuing goals while the recent arrivals have just begun the process of organizing themselves to achieve social mobility.

What is significant is the relative access of the recent immigrants to higher education, better jobs, and housing compared to the earlier group. Relative in this context refers to the absence of official support, ideological or legal, for discriminatory practices which would deny access to these facilities. The barriers are no less formidable although they are not as easily identified.

Because the early immigrants were relegated to low-status jobs, prestige and social mobility could be achieved through personal effort and independent occupational status -- business or the professions. While the current percentage of West Indians in the professions* is unknown, the availability of lucrative white-collar jobs may have made pursuit of the professions less attractive. Besides, professional training often leaves no opportunity for employment and West Indians, frequently, must have employment while training for another occupation. The Pittsburg Courier summarized West Indians' attitudes and performance in the educational field as follows:

> Every West Indian immigrant has a definite purpose in view when he lands in New York, says the Southern Workman. In his own country there were activities which were wholly in the hands of White men, but here he can enter upon these and assume that position of natural leadership which was denied him at home...Seeing that the standard of intellectual requirement in the average colored school is below what would have been expected of him in his own land, he steadily and vigorously pushes his way to the front and finds little opposition in so doing...American methods of education seem to leave too little for the mental teeth of the student, the whole diet being predigested. The American student usually makes better recitation, reciting page after page to the astonishment of the West Indian, but the latter cannot do this, as he has been accustomed to correlate and associate every new fact with an old.

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* The recent migration includes individuals who already have professional training and are able to move directly into their areas of competence.

While the West Indians referred to here were adults and strongly goal-oriented, a large sector of the post-1965 immigrants are young children, many of whom had not yet acquired the art of recitation or the ability to synthesize. They are dependent on the American schools for educational development.

Circumstances sometimes force individuals to set aside goals, which become "dreams deferred" (Langston Hughes, 1951) but not lost. Educational goals of parents are often transferred to their children. West Indians are represented in the professions, in government, and industry. To what extent, it is impossible to say since most are second-generation immigrants and not differentiated from the general population. It is, however, generally accepted that West Indian immigrants are disproportionately represented in the more prestigious employment areas. The parents of such persons have deferred their personal dreams and have invested their hopes in their children. Of the earlier immigrants, it is reasonable to conclude that they have used the opportunities presented to them expediently. They disregarded the racial barriers and created economic opportunities for themselves against great odds.

The new immigrants, however, arrived at a more favorable time. Civil Rights legislation provided them with relatively unimpeded access to educational institutions and employment opportunities previously denied Blacks. Their background situation also included wider access to education, employment, and generally greater chances for social mobility in their own country. It would seem that this group has the potential for achievement without the great stress and sacrifice of the earlier group. What is their situation?

Changes in Immigration Policy have changed the character of the immigration as much as the intervening history has changed the societies.

In fact, the immigration policies reflect some of the changes. Whereas the earlier immigrants were primarily homogenous in class background, the newer immigrants vary along class lines if we use education, occupation, and similarity of life style as class indicators. Whereas the earlier immigrants were assigned low-status jobs, regardless of education and occupation, the recent immigrants are absorbed into the labor force according to their occupation and educational backgrounds as certified by the United States Department of Labor.

Although the new Immigration Policy is considered "favorable" for the West Indies, it nevertheless has some negative consequences, especially for children. Virginia Dominguez (1975:13-14) identified the three main features of the migration from the area in the post-1965 years:

a. Females vastly outnumbered males.

b. The immigration included professionals, clerical, craftsmen, and operatives among its workers' category.

c. British West Indians migrated in family groups less frequently than most other immigrants to the United States.

Between 1967 and 1969, the majority of visas issued were granted to private household workers who were females. Since on-the-job residence is required, it is inconvenient for the immigrant to be accompanied by other members of the family.

Consequences of the Migration Provision

The type of migration situation influences the settlement patterns and adaptation of the immigrants. The complete family unit has the advantage of each other's support and share the experiences of the new life simultaneously.

It is the immigrants who delay the arrival of family that are most likely to experience the greatest difficulty in reorganizing their lives

and reconstituting their families. The reconstitution of families often depends on their marital status, the ages of children, their job situation, and income. Several years may elapse before the process is completed. Migration often means the loss of the services of the extended kinship which is depended on for child care and other supervisory services. The lone female immigrant must cope with economic as well as physical care and protection. If her employment situation requires on-the-job residence, she will delay the arrival of her family until they are old enough to assume the physical care of themselves. Older children are given preference over younger children because they can care for themselves, at least physically. Immigration laws favor children under 18 years of age, thus the large representation of immigrants in the 10-19 age category (see attached Table). The immigrants must also demonstrate that they have the means to support dependents and must often pay for the expenses of the new immigrants. This often results in the separation of mother and children for several years with only brief visits between. The consequence is, sometimes, her inability to exercise parental authority over her new arrivals because her absence had eroded her authority. This is further complicated by the fact that, even here, she is often absent from the home pursuing the means of their economic support.

The major problem in immigrant adaptation seems to emerge from the inability to successfully integrate their children into the host country. This also poses problems for the society because, while the parents provided needed labor force replacement and are of value to the society, the children become liabilities in that the society must provide the resources needed for their successful integration, especially in the matter of their education and training.

Problems Faced by Parents

Immigration statistics indicate that, since 1970, a significant percentage of the immigrants from the West Indies fall into the dependent category: i.e., children of previous immigrants (see attached Table). These children will participate in the school system from elementary to high school, and some will go on to college.

Similar reports show that the largest category of immigrants from 1967-1969 were female domestic household workers. One characteristic of this group is low level of formal education. This does not suggest lack of concern for the education of their children, but they are least able to deal with the processes that would successfully integrate their children into the public education system. Some problems faced are:

1. Lack of basic information on school procedures or how and where to get such information.
2. Work schedules which hinder meaningful contact with school personnel.
3. Reluctance to confront authority figures, and the assumption that teachers will assume the responsibility of teaching as well as seeing that children behave.
4. Difficulty in communicating with teachers.
5. Inability to supervise and control children -- see that they do homework, stay off the streets, etc., because their time is often over-budgeted in "pursuing a living."

The Situation of Immigrant Children

At a conference sponsored by The Jamaican Educational and Cultural Institute, New York City, December, 1977, one speaker, a high school principal, reported that West Indian children are not doing as well in school as is generally believed. This point of view was already current among the conference organizers. He blamed the West Indian community for not actively involving themselves in the processes that would ensure educational equity for their children.

Further investigation of the situation through interviews[4] with other principals of high schools in areas of large West Indian concentration confirmed that the problems were acute, although some denied that there were problems. The problems concerned the schools as well as the children. Those indicated were:

1. Difficulty in obtaining accurate transcripts or transfer records from schools in the West Indies.

2. The absence of standardized evaluative procedures for grade placement so that students are often inaccurately placed in too high/low grades.

3. Problems in communicating. West Indian dialects are the spoken languages of many students although they read and understand standard English. This and the difference in accents are barriers to communication for teachers and students.

4. Students often do not understand the behavioral procedures in the classroom situation: room changes, behavior toward the teachers and other procedures that the average American child takes for granted.

5. Cultural differences which the teachers are unable or reluctant to accommodate. Except in speech patterns and the fact they do not know the rules, West Indian children are not identifiably different from Black American students, and in most cases, will not be seen as needing special attention.

In addition to these problems, the general lack of information curtails students who are capable of higher achievement. One principal indicated that West Indian students get tracked into zone schools even when they have the grade average for admission and the ability to compete successfully in "special high schools," which would enhance their potential for post high school training.

West Indian students share schools primarily with Black Americans. The School Profiles 1976-1977, Board of Education, City of New York, shows that in most of the high schools attended by West Indian students, the vast

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[4]The interviews were done early in 1978 by Megan McLaughlin of Columbia School of Social Work and New York Community Trust, and myself. We were also organizers of the conference mentioned above. The conference was organized to evaluate the general situation of West Indian immigrants in the New York Metropolitan Area. The education of children was a prime focus.

majority of students are reading two years below grade level. Survey of the elementary reading levels shows a decline as grade levels increased. It is reasonable to assume that West Indian children are implicated in these statistics.

Conclusion

The Coleman Report (1967) attributed educational success to family background of students. This is commonly interpreted to mean that "middle-class background" is a requirement for success. The success of the earlier immigrants' children had much to do with family back ground, not the economic aspect but the orientation to middle-class goals. Their determination to get success for their children made them willing to confront any obstacles which stood in their way. They also exercised more authority over their children protecting them from the sociocultural environment. Many of these were born here and had the benefit of early socialization into the school system.

The fact that, among recent immigrants, parents as well as children enter the society without the benefit of timely socialization, the cultural differences encountered, in addition to recent changes in educational policies and practices, create an uncertain atmosphere. Some parents send their children to private schools where they consider the discipline to be better, or leave their children in their own country to complete high schools. This is an attempt to manipulate a system they characterize as unresponsive.

There seems to be a marked difference in the students who finish high school in the West Indies in terms of their ability to handle college work. A study by a Brooklyn College professor[5] revealed a higher level of

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[5] Glantz, Oscar. "Native Sons and Immigrants: Some Beliefs and Values of American-Born and West Indian Blacks at Brooklyn College," Ethnicity, No. 5, 1978.

aspiration among West Indians than among Black American students. What is the source of the motivation to succeed, the parents or the school system? Conversely, are the parents or the schools to be blamed for the lack of motivation to achieve among recent West Indians in the public schools? Before any conclusions can be drawn, some basic research is needed that will more accurately identify the problems and special needs of West Indian students. At this time, it seems that it is not so much the inability of students as it is the failure of the educational system and the West Indies' community to make the educational process meaningful.

TABLE

MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES FROM JAMAICA

BY SEX AND AGE, 1967-1977

	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
TOTAL	10,483	17,470	16,947	15,033	14,571	13,427	9,963	12,408	11,076	9,026	11,501
MALES											
Total	2,543	4,674	6,306	7,109	6,835	6,394	4,971	6,260	5,294	4,332	5,675
Under 5	109	205	292	363	322	265	189	191	150	151	242
5- 9	205	320	549	897	850	848	708	833	622	435	481
10-19	430	765	1,129	1,851	1,936	2,007	1,616	2,301	2,060	1,532	1,754
20-29	627	1,062	1,254	1,231	1,255	1,250	995	1,666	916	796	994
30-39	688	1,241	1,634	1,415	1,283	1,026	756	919	828	744	1,069
40-49	282	673	975	826	703	568	412	464	395	376	574
50-59	117	290	372	411	357	305	207	274	212	197	338
60 and over	85	118	101	115	129	125	88	112	111	101	224
FEMALES											
Total	7,940	12,796	10,641	7,924	7,736	7,033	4,992	6,148	5,782	4,694	5,826
Under 5	141	182	308	361	341	261	219	213	188	160	250
5- 9	248	363	586	906	985	913	657	867	631	454	481
10-19	654	1,088	1,482	2,194	2,273	2,174	1,750	2,286	2,132	1,537	1,642
20-29	2,183	4,064	3,035	1,614	1,433	1,307	991	1,101	964	902	1,083
30-39	2,150	3,686	2,613	1,385	1,169	982	541	659	376	581	909
40-49	1,422	2,106	1,545	804	773	635	364	389	734	391	529
50-59	798	958	759	447	510	465	282	371	490	365	522
60 and over	344	349	313	213	252	296	188	262	267	304	405

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice 1967-1977

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